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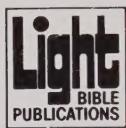
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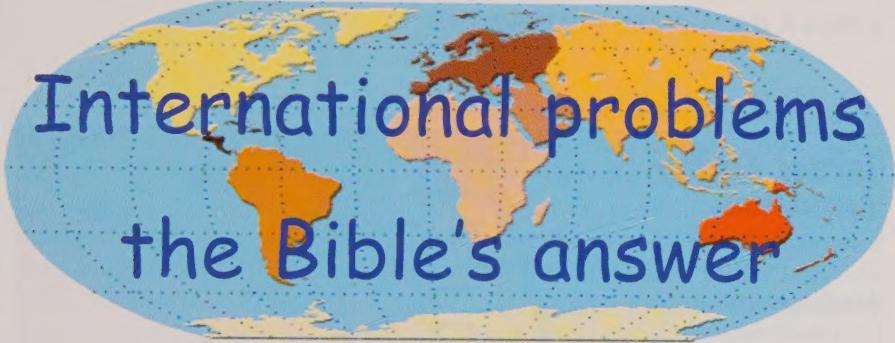
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Cover picture: Winter beauty



International problems the Bible's answer

Israel - whose land is it?

EVERYONE KNOWS ABOUT the dispute over the area of land at the eastern end of the Mediterranean that today is called Israel. This is a problem that affects the whole of the Middle East. In fact, the problem affects the whole world and is probably the most serious international problem at the present time. I say that because it has the potential to cause world war. Not that this is a new problem - this land has been argued and fought over for the best part of 4,000 years, if not longer.

If you look back into history, you will find that a succession of peoples have occupied the land. I'm primarily referring to the southern part of the area that is now called Israel. A great many of these powers ruled from other countries. Examples in this category from long ago are Egypt, the Hittites, Babylon, Persia and Greece but other ancient nations also held the land for short periods. The Jews held it independently for 1,000 years and there has been a Jewish population there for much longer than that. The number of Jews have varied but the period is around 3,500 years in total.

Nations like the Romans have also conquered the land and Israel subsequently became Christian for 300 years. Then Arabs took control until a thousand years ago when the Crusades began which in turn lasted for 200 years. Britain was involved at that time as she has been since and still is in other ways but not without intervals of conquest by Mamelukes and Ottoman Turks. Many countries have been involved but the object of interest is this same piece of land called Israel (see map on page 2).



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Looking at the history of the area in overview, there are several ways of trying to make sense of the situation. Many nations and peoples have been involved in the land of Israel. This means that many claims to the land could be put forward - but who is to decide how far back to go? Sometimes this can get very far fetched indeed - some people even claim to be the descendants of the Canaanites in an attempt to predate the Jews! The Canaanites were a collection of primitive city-states that occupied Canaan and passed off the scene some 3,500 years ago.

This prompts the obvious question - how many countries are inhabited by their original peoples? England, the country I live in certainly isn't, at least the original ones are in a minority here, as are the original Indian tribes in North America. Anyway, what do we mean by 'original peoples' in this context? Who really knows? The point is that, if you start trying to change the status quo, you run into all kinds of problems and inconsistencies.

The next point is that, because there has been so much outside meddling in the land of Israel, the country has been self-governed for only 1,000 years - by the Jewish nations of long ago and today. Only the Jews have been self-governing in the land for a sustained period of time. That may come as a surprise. Another factor is that some believe race to be of lesser importance than religion. There are three religions each with a claim to the land. In order of introduction, the Jewish faith came first with Christianity developing out of it. Lastly, Islam was introduced from Arabia.

The other point we should mention is that the Jews have now transformed a neglected land into something quite remarkable. They have greatly improved the conditions under which people live and this includes Arabs living in the State of Israel. One example of this is the number of infant deaths. Israel's occupation of Gaza and the West Bank reduced infant deaths to a fifth of what they were under Arab rule.

Let us now look at the problem from two perspectives - firstly to examine the religious viewpoint and secondly to review recent history and current events. If you are an orthodox Jew, your religion is Judaism and your authority is the Old Testament. If you are a practising Christian, the basis of your religious belief is the whole of the Bible (Old and New Testaments) - so there is a certain affinity here. If you are a Muslim, your basis is the Koran.

It is not the purpose of this article to discuss which religion is right. These matters are often dealt with in the pages of 'Light.' However, if you are a Christian and accept the Bible, you cannot ignore what the Bible says about Israel. Does it give us the answer to the question 'whose land is it?' The Christian does not have any choice - any more than a Jew has. In other words, it is possible to adopt a view of the problem in Israel, which is in direct conflict with one's faith.

THE PROMISE TO ABRAHAM

What does the Bible say about whose land this is? God tells us whose it is in the words of a promise made to Abraham the father of the Jewish race. He repeated it several times. We read in the book of Genesis that Abraham was told by God to leave his homeland. He obeyed this instruction and eventually came to live in the land of Canaan (now Israel) and God made a very long term promise to him.

'And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land. And the LORD appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the LORD, who appeared unto him' [Genesis 12.6,7].

So God gave Abram or Abraham as he was later called, a promise of the land. Now, the Moslem might reply 'Yes, but we too are descended from Abraham.' Of course that is true but read on:

'And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live before thee! And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him...But my covenant will I establish with Isaac...' [Genesis 17.18-21]

Ishmael, you may know, was the other son of Abraham, the son from whom the Arabs are descended. So God has promised something to the Arabs but the land of Israel He gave to Isaac and his descendants. It was an everlasting promise, although there were certain temporary gaps occasioned by the wrongs of the nation. At such times the majority of Jews left the land as captives. There were however, small numbers of Jews in the land throughout history. God always said he would bring Israel back whenever she left the land. That is the basis of the Jewish claim to the area we know as Israel.

THE PROMISE REPEATED

If that is not convincing enough, let us look at a repetition of the promise to Jacob, for God repeated the promise many times. Genesis chapter 28 shows how the grandson of Abraham, whose name was Jacob, was given the same promise. This man is the undisputed founder of the Jewish people, the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob was on a journey and he received a vision from God at a place he afterwards called Bethel (meaning 'the house of God'):

'And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth...And, behold, the LORD stood above it, and said, I am the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed; and thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed'

[Genesis 28.12-14].

The same message was repeated over and over again. Moses repeated it and it was also the subject of a promise to David which he referred to in one of the Psalms.

'He hath remembered his covenant for ever...Which covenant he made with Abraham, and his oath unto Isaac; and confirmed the same unto Jacob for a law, and to Israel for an everlasting covenant: saying, Unto thee will I give the land of Canaan, the lot of your inheritance'

[Psalm 105.8-11].

THE MESSAGE OF ISRAEL'S PROPHETS

The Old Testament prophets spoke of this same promise, a promise that would not be affected by the suffering of the Jews. They also predicted how it would be achieved. Take for example the prophet Ezekiel who tells us about the return of the Jews to their land, 2,500 years in advance:

'And say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I will take the children of Israel from among the heathen, whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land: And I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king to them all: and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all.'

[Ezekiel 37.21,22]

You could not wish for a clearer statement about whose land it really is. It is apparent that what we have witnessed over the last century goes a long

way to fulfilling this prophecy. The prophet also describes how God will defend this land. We have already witnessed the unseen hand of God and will see Him working more openly when the nation's existence is challenged - we can see that challenge building up now.

THE CURRENT PROBLEM

The international perception of Israel is not good at the present time. We frequently hear her spoken of in very critical tones. This is perhaps less so in the United Kingdom and the USA but even in these countries Israel has her critics. The situation in Israel is very serious. Israeli-Palestinian discord is such that it seems impossible for a lasting solution to be found without the intervention of the Almighty.



Palestinians at Israeli border checkpoint



The news of late demonstrates the sheer intransigence of the Palestinians. Israel has made mistakes but the majority of Palestinians are clearly challenging Israel's right to exist in any shape or form. It is a view held more strongly today than at any time since the idea of the State of Israel was first suggested. In other words, the Palestinians reject the so-called 'two state' solution whereby the State of Israel would coexist with a Palestinian nation. This has been accepted by many Arab states including Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

There is an increasing blind acceptance right across the globe that the Palestinians' challenge is legitimate. This challenge has the strategy of attempting to refute the right of Israel to be in the land at all. It condemns her policies and actions. It also masterminds terrorism. The Palestinians contend

that Israel has no historical right to the land. Although quick to grasp any UN resolution censoring Israel, they do not accept the solid international agreements on which the State of Israel was founded. These were not casually concocted by one nation - they were based on a proper international consensus.

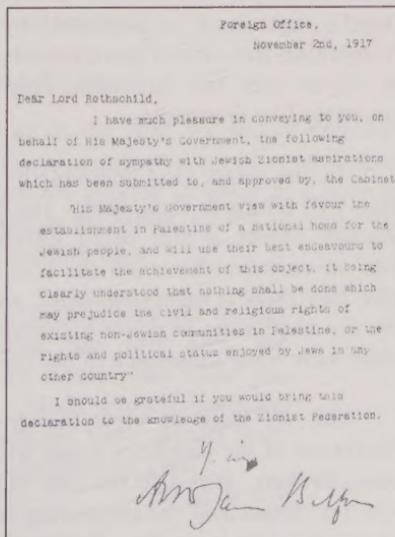
The fact is that Palestine had been the territory of foreign powers for centuries. At the outbreak of World War I, Palestine was a part of Turkey. Turkey backed the losing side and this resulted in her losing the land that is now Israel. As with other boundary issues, the settlement of what should happen to the land was decided by international treaty. This placed Palestine under the mandate of Britain.

THE BALFOUR DECLARATION

First, there was the 1917 Balfour Declaration drawn up when Britain gained the mandate over the land during the First World War. Extensive consultation was carried out before this declaration was made. At the same time the Jewish population of the land was growing. From a human point of view, the idea of the founding of a Jewish state was largely developed in the late 19th century by a man named Theodor Herzl who wrote a book called 'The Jewish State'.



Theodor Herzl



The Balfour Declaration

After the Balfour Declaration, long and detailed consideration was given to a division of the land between Israel and the Palestinians. For example, a commission looked into this and reported without bias. This report shows that the Jews had a legitimate claim to part of the land. Then the UN voted in favour of partition in 1947. Well, you know what happened after that – there were four wars because the Arabs chose to ignore the UN. Israel won all these wars after which some Arab states made peace but others have not.

The problem is that the Palestinians forget that they never had a state of their own. Whether we like it or not, the world's boundaries have been redrawn many times in history. That is why, for example, cities like Metz and Strasbourg are now part of France whereas before World War II they were in Germany. Even if one could put the clock back it would not favour the Palestinians. If national territories are to be debated in this way, how many nations would escape? Many nations have a weaker basis than Israel. The enemies of Israel claim ancestry from the Canaanite peoples driven out by Joshua. They contend that Jews were a minority in the area and the land was unfairly allotted to them in 1947.

ANTI-SEMITISM

It is abundantly clear that Israel not only has God's everlasting promise to Abraham in her favour but also her foundation as a state in 1948 was the result of proper international processes. However, no matter how reasonable Israel's right is, it is contested by a people that have gained international recognition from many governments. In reality, we see anti-Semitism. This is as rife as ever and increasing despite all that has happened to the shame of countries like Germany.

In one sense, God undoubtedly protects His people and has promised that they will return to their land. The other side of the coin is that the prophecy through Moses is still being fulfilled: '*And among these nations shalt thou find no ease, neither shall the sole of thy foot have rest: but the LORD shall give thee there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and sorrow of mind: and thy life shall hang in doubt before thee; and thou shalt fear day and night, and shalt have none assurance of thy life'* [Deuteronomy 28.65,66].

So, we have to view the growing international criticism of Israel as fulfilment of the prophecy about what would happen in the event of God's law being broken. It is also the case that prophecy shows that this opposition will reach a climax and the opposition will itself be destroyed. This is predicted in many places in Scripture. For example the prophet Joel wrote:

'For, behold, in those days, and in that time, when I shall bring again the captivity of Judah and Jerusalem, I will also gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat, and will plead with them there for my people and for my heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted my land...Proclaim ye this among the Gentiles; Prepare war, wake up the mighty men, let all the men of war draw near; let them come up: beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruninghooks into spears: let the weak say, I am strong...The LORD also shall roar out of Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the heavens and the earth shall shake: but the LORD will be the hope of his people, and the strength of the children of Israel. So shall ye know that I am the LORD your God dwelling in Zion, my holy mountain: then shall Jerusalem be holy, and there shall no strangers pass through her any more'

[Joel 3. 1,2,9,10,16,17].

So you can see that there is significance in the current situation in the Middle East. There is the will to destroy Israel and it is spreading. This means that nations are moving in the direction of the battlefield that will see the intervention of Christ and the fulfilment of prophecy.

THE REAL SOLUTION

If we ever doubt that Israel has a future in the land, we should consider the prophecies that show us the real meaning of an otherwise rather confusing situation. The word of God takes us beyond the present troubles to a time of world peace. Not only is trouble mentioned in the Bible, so too is peace for Israel and the World. The words of Isaiah confirm this:

'Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city: for henceforth there shall no more come into thee the uncircumcised and the unclean. Shake thyself from the dust; arise, and sit down, O Jerusalem: loose thyself from the bands of thy neck, O captive daughter of Zion.'

[Isaiah 52.1,2]

Then there is mention of a group of men and women called ‘my people’. This in fact is comprised of all that obey God’s Word:

‘How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth! Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing: for they shall see eye to eye, when the LORD shall bring again Zion. Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem: for the LORD hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem’ *[Isaiah 52.7-9]*.

That then is the ultimate solution to the troubles in Israel. It is the ultimate answer to the question - whose land is it ?’ The short answer is - God’s land - and He has given it to the Jews! They have yet to acknowledge their Messiah, who is Christ - but they will do so when he returns.

CONCLUSION

The future is not just about peace for Israel. Christ will bring world peace. There is much to confirm this in the Bible. It will be a time of peace and plenty when every blessing will be given to those who recognise and obey God, a time when all ill and trouble will pass. The prophet Isaiah who gives us so many word pictures of the age to come, sums it up like this:

‘And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever.’

[Isaiah 32.17]

What this means for us today is that we should prepare ourselves to take part in this future time. The Bible tells us how to do this. It is not hard but it is very important to each individual. It involves effort on our part but it is effort that will be very well repaid.

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What did Jesus mean?

‘...the fire that shall never be quenched.’

THE WORDS OF Jesus forming the title of this article are understood by some religious bodies to have a literal application. They take this saying of Jesus to be a solemn warning to the wicked that they will spend eternity suffering the torment of hell-fire. Other verses are also quoted in their claim to this interpretation (See for example Matthew 5.22 and Luke 16.23).

LANGUAGE STYLE

Not all of Jesus' sayings are intended to carry a literal meaning as for example, his parables which are poetic and imaginative comparisons. Like figures of speech they challenge men to think. Idiom too, is a feature of language of which Hebrew and Greek, the original languages of the Bible are no exception. Idiomatic expressions help to give more vigour and style to any language, which without its use, would probably be more formal and dreary.

We are familiar with the following idiomatic expressions in our own language; ‘give the cold shoulder’, ‘bury the hatchet’, ‘raining cats and dogs’. These word-pictures help us better understand abstract ideas where literal interpretation is not intended. In this category we find the following passage in the writings of Solomon; *‘Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it’ [Song of Solomon 8.7 NKJV]*

BACKGROUND

The background and circumstances relative to the words that Jesus spoke, also need to be considered. Symbols and history too, play an important part in satisfactory interpretation. From Mark’s Gospel record we learn that this particular saying of Jesus was given at the time he was beginning his final

journey southward towards Jerusalem. He told his disciples of his approaching betrayal, trial and crucifixion but as Mark records: '*they did not understand this saying, and were afraid to ask him*' [Mark 9.32 NKJV].

A TWO-FOLD MISSION

As yet they had not fully comprehended what the two-fold mission of Jesus entailed. First, bearing sinful nature, as we see from his ancestry in the Gospel records, yet, as Peter records he was a man '*who committed no sin, nor was guile found in his mouth*' [1 Peter 2.22 NKJV].

Jesus established the God-appointed way for the forgiveness of sins. His second coming will have repercussions far beyond the borders of Israel. This point was emphasised by the Apostle Paul when he said to the pagan Athenians on Mars Hill: '*he (God) has appointed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all, by raising him from the dead*' [Acts 17.31 NKJV].

That the disciples did not grasp this two-fold mission can be seen in the remarks made by two of them three days after the crucifixion: '*we were hoping that it was he who was going to redeem Israel*' [Luke 24.21 NKJV]. Believing Jesus to be the Son of God and possessed of miraculous powers, the disciples expected their land and Jerusalem to be liberated from the Roman occupying power there and then.

THE NEED FOR HUMILITY

Pre-occupied with this scenario, the impending sufferings of Jesus failed to register in the minds of the disciples. Instead, they were assessing the prospects of political power. Although the disciples declined to answer Jesus' enquiry about their dispositions, he knew, nevertheless, what was in their hearts. Jesus' estimation of pride is that it defiles man [Mark 7.22,23]. The godly attribute is humility and to epitomise this quality, Jesus with his disciples around him, gathered up a child into his arms and said:

'Whoever receives one of these little children in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me' [Mark 9.37 NKJV].

To ‘receive’ Jesus is to receive his teaching. With a child-like disposition, a willingness to learn, this was possible and this emphasis was befitting the experience of Jesus who, in his ministry ‘endured such hostility from sinners against himself’ [Hebrews 12.3 NKJV].

The disciples were to learn other godly traits as they continued their journey towards Jerusalem. They would need to have the mind of the Spirit to discharge their responsibility of preaching the gospel in the days ahead. They would need to put aside the characteristics of evil in human nature, such as, pride, arrogance, self-seeking and intolerance. Jesus would not compromise nor accommodate any of these, especially when they were a cause of stumbling to any of his ‘little ones’ - an affectionate term applied to his followers. He therefore voiced the most vigorous language in his condemnation of these traits vividly expressed in the following words:

‘And whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand makes you sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched - where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched’ [Mark 9.42-44 NKJV].

Jesus repeated this saying to include the ‘cutting off of the foot’ and the ‘plucking out of the eye’. This of course, is exaggerated speech, the language of hyperbole, yet expressing the truth that a lustful eye will not get the owner of it into the kingdom of God. Even in this present life it is necessary to cut off a gangrenous limb if the life of the patient is to be saved. But what did Jesus mean when he spoke of ‘the fire that shall never be quenched’?

SYMBOLS AND HISTORY

When Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden of Eden so that they should not partake of the tree of life, God ‘placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way’ [Genesis 3.24 NKJV]. In this way, God set before men the symbol of fire as a representation of His judgment if they broke His commandments and turned from His ways.

The nation of Israel was given commandments by God which they were to obey and were told:

‘Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God which he made with you... For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God’

[Deuteronomy 4.23,24 NKJV].

Should they fail later to comply with their covenant obligations, the consequences would be:

‘...you will soon utterly perish from the land which you cross over the Jordan to possess; you will not prolong your days in it, but will be utterly destroyed. And the LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations...’

[Deuteronomy 4. 26,27 NKJV]

DIVINE JUDGEMENT

The fiery judgments of God would be demonstrated in the removal of the people from their land and their dispersion among the nations. The warnings are taken up by later prophets in Israel’s history. For example, in the 8th century BC, Isaiah prophesied against ‘*Ariel, the city where David dwelt*’ in these terms:

‘I will encamp against you all around, I will lay siege against you with a mound, and I will raise siege-works against you... You will be punished by the LORD of hosts with thunder and earthquake and great noise, with storm and tempest, and the flame of devouring fire’

[Isaiah 29. 3,6 NKJV].

In Isaiah’s time the judgments of God against Mount Zion (Jerusalem), were averted by the faithfulness of King Hezekiah, and so the prophet promised:

‘Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an

arrow there, nor come before it with shield, nor build a siege-mound against it' [Isaiah 37.33 NKJV].

About one hundred years later, Jeremiah the prophet of the southern kingdom of Judah, took up the warning of Deuteronomy: '*The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron .. I will cause you to serve your enemies in the land which you do not know; for you have kindled a fire in my anger which shall burn for ever*' [Jeremiah 17.1,4 NKJV].

THE VALLEY OF HINNOM

Josiah was a faithful king who supported Jeremiah in spreading throughout his kingdom loyalty to and worship of God. In his reforming zeal the king destroyed throughout the land, high places, groves, images and all outward signs and relics of idolatry. Included was the pagan shrine in the valley of the son of Hinnom to the south of Jerusalem, where earlier kings of Judah dedicated their sons to the worship of Molech by passing them through the fire. Josiah put an end to these abominations by polluting the site and making it ceremonially unclean. Later, that valley was used for the disposal of the city's rubbish and sewage.



The Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna).

The word 'Hell' in Mark chapter 9 is translated from the Greek word 'Gehenna' which corresponds with the Hebrew word 'Ghi-Hinnom' (See Mark 9 verse 43, 45 and 47). The fires constantly burning in that valley were a familiar sight to the inhabitants of Jerusalem. That which remained from the fires was consumed by the worm. Jesus, therefore, uses the word 'Gehenna' as a symbol of complete and utter destruction, not as a term implying eternal preservation in torment.

The reforms of Josiah were not sustained by his successors and 22 years after the death of this righteous king, Judah was finally taken into captivity by Babylon. In the last chapter of the Second Book of Chronicles, the reason is given why God's wrath arose in the judgments poured out upon His people.

'...the LORD God...sent warnings to them by his messengers...because he had compassion on his people...But they mocked the messengers of God... until the wrath of the LORD arose against his people, till there was no remedy. Therefore he brought against them the king of the Chaldeans...Then they burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious possessions. And those who escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon...' [2 Chronicles 36.15-20 NKJV].

Jeremiah had this event in mind when he said: '*I (God) will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched*' [Jeremiah 17.27 NKJV]. God's purpose was achieved - there was no stopping the Babylonian invasion - no reprieve for the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. The fire was not quenched until it had consumed all that could be burned. It was neither abated nor checked in keeping with the declaration of Isaiah which refers to God's judicial power as well as his creative power: '*So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it*' [Isaiah 55.11 NKJV].

CONCLUSION

These very real events in Israel's history were used by Jesus as graphic figures to impress on his disciples the ultimate destiny of those who incur God's wrath. Their ultimate destiny is not everlasting torment but '*everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord*' [2 Thessalonians 1.9 NKJV]. By contrast, the ultimate destiny of those who seek to honour God in their lives, by believing and obeying His word, is that described by the Psalmist:

'The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell in it forever' [Psalm 37.29 NKJV].

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Justification by faith

IT MIGHT BE thought that the title of this article is a subject best left to theologians - that it is too technical for ordinary folk, but this is far from the truth. This article will try to show that the subject is at the very heart of the gospel of salvation and is about the forgiveness of sins. There are three key words used in the Bible which need to be understood if the subject is to be properly grasped:

- justification
- faith
- grace

Let us look at the word justification first. A person is justified when they are declared to be right; such a person is just. We could also say that the person is righteous. We could not however say that the person had been ‘righteousified’ because the word does not exist in the English language. Instead we use the word ‘justified’.

The second word – faith, means belief or conviction. In the Bible it is belief in God and Jesus Christ, in their existence and the things they have said. The third word - grace, is often associated with justification by faith and in this context refers to the lovingkindness and generosity of God in giving righteousness to the person who believes him.

THE ORIGIN OF SIN

The Apostle Paul wrote an exposition on the subject of justification by faith in his letter to the Roman believers. In it he explains why we need to be justified. For example he wrote: '*There is no-one righteous, not even one*' [*Romans 3.10 NIV*]. He also explains that sin entered the world through one man and that the man died as a consequence of his sin. Worse still, in this way death came to all men [*Romans 5.12*]. The man Paul was referring to was Adam, the father of the human race, the first man to be created by God.

It is important therefore, to discover what Adam's sin was and why the consequences were and continue to be so dire. The history of this catastrophic event is to be found in the first book of the Bible called Genesis [*Genesis 3.1-6*]. From a reading of this historical account we learn some crucial and startling facts. Firstly, Adam's wife and subsequently Adam himself, opted to believe the words of the serpent instead of God. Secondly, God had given Adam the responsibility of ruling over all living creatures and yet Adam abdicated his responsibility and elected to follow the advice of his helper rather than obey God. The effects of this irrational behaviour are extremely serious.

God's command to Adam was simple and was certainly understood by Adam and Eve. God said: '*You must not eat from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die*' [*Genesis 3.3 NIV*]. However, the serpent contradicted God and told Eve '*You will not surely die*' [*Genesis 3.4 NIV*]. Obviously both could not be true, either God or the serpent was being deceitful and were misleading our first parents. They came to the decision that God was the deceiver and had lied to them about the tree. Much could be written about the reason for such an irrational conclusion but that is another subject.

The fact remains that by his action Adam had declared God to be a liar. This was blasphemy of the highest order and a terrible insult to the Lord of all creation. In the words of the Bible, '*Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar*' [*1 John 5.10 NIV*] and Adam was absolutely wrong as he found out when sentence was passed upon him. Death had entered the world as a consequence of his behaviour. However, his lack of belief and trust in God was not allowed to impede God's plans for His creation and so God introduced what we might call contingency plans to overcome the problem created by Adam.

GOD'S PLAN FOR OVERCOMING SIN

God stated in Genesis that He would make man in His image and likeness, but man was now nothing like God. Man was now a liar, a slanderer of God and a dying creature. God's contingency plan however is able to overcome all of these problems and the message of the Bible is devoted to just that. The plan is that provided a person believes God, their sinfulness will be forgiven. This can be expressed in another way i.e. that the person has been made righteous. Whereas the sinner could do nothing to put away his sins, God could and does. God forgives the person who acknowledges his sins and

asks for forgiveness. The Psalms express this clearly: '*For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us*' [Psalm 103.11,12 NIV].

RIGHTEOUSNESS GIVEN TO US BY GOD

It follows logically that if the sins have been so far removed the person has become righteous. That righteousness is a gift of God. Note the all-important point, that this gift of righteousness is for those who fear God. We should add by the way, that this is not abject terror of God but reverence. Such an attitude of mind of course springs from a firm belief in the existence of God and His love towards us in providing salvation from our sins and death. To quote one of the Bible's best known verses: '*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life*' [John 3.16 NKJV].

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAITH

It is evident, therefore, that belief or faith is of the utmost importance to us. It is also evident that Jesus is deeply involved in the process of our salvation. Jesus himself commanded his apostles, '*Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned*' [Mark 16.15,16 NIV].

The teaching of the principle of justification by faith appears very early in the Bible as one might expect. It is first mentioned in Genesis chapter 12 in promises made by God to a man named Abram whose name was later changed to Abraham. In changing his name God said: '*for I have made you a father of many nations*' [Genesis 17.5 NIV].

Paul draws heavily upon the history of this man in his exposition of justification by faith especially in his letters to the believers in Rome and Galatia. There are many other references to Abraham in both the Old and New Testaments. Indeed, he is held up to Christians as an example in faith. We will now look at some of the facts about this man as they impinge upon our subject.

Abram lived about 4,000 years ago in the city of Ur the ruins of which are now in Iraq which was then called Chaldea. The God of glory appeared

unto him there [*Acts 7.2*] and made promises to him of huge significance. God said: *'I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing...and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you'* [*Genesis 12.2,3 NIV*]. The remarkable fact is that this man was elderly, childless and his wife was barren. Nonetheless he believed what God had told him and further carried out His instructions, which were to leave his home city and go to some unknown place to which God would lead him.

Abram eventually arrived in the centre of a land known as Canaan, which today is called Israel. By the way, the nation of Israel is named after Abram's grandson. On arrival God said to him: *'To your offspring I will give this land'* [*Genesis 12.7 NIV*].

Years passed and some of Abram's experiences are recorded. They show his humanity with which we can sympathise, but the chief worry was that notwithstanding God's emphatic promises about becoming a great nation, so far he had not even one child! When Abram queried this with God, the reply came back, *'Look up at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them...So shall your offspring be.'* Then the record continues: *'Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him for righteousness.'* [*Genesis 15.5,6 NIV*].

THE MEANING OF JUSTIFICATION

Paul quotes this important reference when discussing justification by faith. In the first example, Paul explains that God credited Abram with righteousness not because he had done anything concrete to deserve it but simply because he believed what God had said.

To emphasise what being credited with righteousness meant, Paul went on to quote from the Psalms to show that the gift of righteousness equates to the forgiveness of sins: *'David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him'* [*Romans 4.6-8 NIV*].

JUSTIFICATION PROMISED TO THOSE WHO BELIEVE

Paul next poses the question, 'Is this blessedness available to Abraham's

natural descendants only?" and the answer is no! - for he continues, '*The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness - for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead*' [Romans 4.23,24 NIV]. The one who raised Jesus from the dead was God; therefore if we believe Him we too shall have righteousness given to us just like Abraham.

If we look back over some of the quotations already made in this article we could already have made this deduction. For example:

'...all peoples on earth will be blessed through you'
(Abraham) [Genesis 12.3 NIV].

'Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved...'
[Mark 16.16 NIV]

'...God so loved the world that...whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' [John 3.16 NIV].

This is how Paul reasons in his letter to the Galatians: 'Consider Abraham:' he writes, 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.' [Galatians 3.6-9 NIV]

Paul's reasoning in this letter reiterates a point made in his letter to the Romans quoted at the beginning of this article: 'Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin' and adds, 'so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.' Then he continues with this startling thought: 'You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise' [Galatians 3.22, 26-29 NIV].

So having our sins forgiven by God, being justified by faith or having righteousness given to us has far-reaching and wonderful consequences. We

become God's children, heirs of the promise made to Abraham and will no longer perish but can look forward to eternal life.

All of this is good news indeed and as Paul has shown, this Gospel was foreseen about 4,000 years ago when God announced it to Abraham.

FAITH AND WORKS

We are naturally conditioned to think that we must earn many of those things we possess in this life. As a minimum we must work to provide ourselves with the necessities of life - food, shelter, clothing and the harder we work the more we shall acquire to make life more comfortable. However, this is not true of salvation.

Underlying Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians was his desire to persuade his brethren the Jews, that it was impossible for them to earn their salvation. Many thought that by keeping the Law of Moses meticulously, they could justify themselves and expect salvation as a right. Also, because of their special relationship with God, other races were considered inferior. It is true that God had chosen them to receive great privileges as Paul wrote '*What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew? ...Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God.*' [Romans 3.1 NIV], and he adds, '*Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises.*' [Romans 9.4 NIV]

But as we have shown above, salvation was never intended to be for the Jews only. Yes, they could claim natural descent from Abraham and they had received God's revelation to mankind, but with these things came responsibilities. Their primary responsibility was to believe the words which God had entrusted to them.

AN ABSTRACT QUALITY OF CHARACTER

Now belief is an abstract quality which can only be seen in the manner in which a person lives. For example the first commandment given to Israel was that they should love the LORD their God with all their heart and strength, yet quite a cursory glance at the Scriptures will show that for the most part Israel worshipped the idols of the surrounding nations and finally so

hated God's beloved son that they cruelly put him to death. Thus their behaviour demonstrated their unbelief.

The same principle applies to the Christian. If we profess to love God and believe in Him, then our behaviour must match our profession. Not that we can then claim salvation as a right but in order to demonstrate to God that our profession of faith in Him is genuine. Salvation is a gift from God – it is not ours by right and we can't earn it.

EVIDENCE THAT FAITH EXISTS

This is plainly expressed in the letter of James: '*...do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ...his faith and his actions were working together; and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone"* [James 2.20-24 NIV]. The amazing incident of Abraham being so obedient to God that he willingly prepared to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, demonstrates the fact that God tests all His children to ascertain whether their profession of belief in Him is genuine.

In fact, the scriptures give many, many examples of men and women being tested. Even Jesus underwent this testing but unlike any man before or since, came through it faultlessly.

SUMMARY

Adam's unbelief in God brought death into the world, but belief in God's plan of salvation will bring everlasting life to everyone who believes.

So we need to think carefully about God's offer of salvation to those who believe. Yes He will give us righteousness on account of our faith in Him but does our way of life prove to Him that we are genuine. For example, have we read God's Word, do we know what He expects us to believe and is our life an attempt to follow his commands? The reward offered by God is so great, who could possibly turn down His generous offer?

Geoffrey Mitchell
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Editorial

THE AMERICANS HAVE finally captured Saddam Hussein. This news is being flashed round the world as I write this editorial. Although the regime which terrorised many people in Iraq was deposed earlier in the year, there was always the fear that he could make a comeback and this is no longer possible.

Saddam modelled his life on one of Iraq's ancient kings called Nebuchadnezzar who ruled the same country - then called Babylon around 600 BC. Nebuchadnezzar was a man of great ambition and a great builder. He built magnificent palaces, temples and great monuments - the hanging gardens of Babylon were one of the wonders of the ancient world. He even had his name inscribed on each of the bricks of these great edifices. Saddam has attempted to do the same even to the extent of trying to re-build the ancient city of Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar also was a great army commander who conquered the nations of the Middle East and established a powerful empire in the ancient world. His cruelty has been left on record particularly towards the Jews. For he invaded their land, sacked Jerusalem, killing many of its inhabitants and took the remainder as captives to Babylon.

Saddam has of course shown the same animosity towards the Jews. The exploits of Nebuchadnezzar have almost been used as a blueprint for Saddam's ambition to destroy Israel and set himself up as the leading power in the Middle East. But God has decreed otherwise as we read in the book of Daniel these words addressed to Nebuchadnezzar: '*Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever: for wisdom and might are his... he removeth kings, and setteth up kings'* [Daniel 2.20,21].

With the removal of Saddam, the world has perhaps 'breathed a sigh of relief' but there are many other international problems which have not been resolved. Israel still has many enemies and this month we begin a new series. The first article examines the problem of Israel and the Palestinians.

Editor

Animals of the Bible

The Lion



THE KING OF beasts is an apt description of the lion (*Panthera Leo*). It is referred to in the Bible more than any other wild animal. The two species of lion, the African lion and the Asiatic lion, both inhabited Bible lands. The African lion roamed Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula and the Asiatic lion wandered through Palestine, Arabia, Babylon, Assyria and Persia.

However the lion in the wild has virtually disappeared from Bible lands. The last known encounter in Israel was at the time of the Crusades when one was killed near Megiddo. Some of the early archaeological expeditions to ancient Biblical sites reported seeing lions in Syria around 1850 and when Layard was working on excavations in Babylon and Nineveh (Iraq) in the same period, he tells how their tracks were seen frequently.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A LION

The writers of 37 of the Bible's 66 books mention the lion some 157 times. We find that they use the lion's attributes and characteristics quite often in their literature. They may be referring to actual events involving a lion, or to illustrate a point they are making in their message, or sometimes they use the lion as a symbol.

In the book of Proverbs, King Solomon refers to those who are '*majestic in pace*' and '*stately in walk: A lion, which is mighty among beasts and does not turn away from any*' [Proverbs 30.30 NKJV].

The lion's habits are often referred to in Scripture: '*...it is night, in which all the beasts of the forest creep about. The young lions roar after their prey, and seek food from God*' [Psalm 104.20,21 NKJV]. The writer of another Psalm

refers to an evil person who preys on others: '*His eyes are secretly fixed on the helpless. He lies in wait secretly, as a lion in his den...So he crouches, he lies low, That the helpless may fall by his strength*' [Psalm 10.8-10 NKJV].

For the people of Bible times, the presence of the lion was a real threat to their daily lives. The first mention in the Bible of a person being attacked by a lion, is when Samson went into Philistine country, to Timnah: '*Now to his surprise, a young lion came roaring against him. And the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon him, and he tore the lion apart as one would have torn apart a young goat, though he had nothing in his hand*' [Judges 14.5,6 NKJV]. This event in Samson's life highlights the dangers that the people of those times faced from wild animals. There are other instances recorded in the Bible where people were killed and devoured by lions (see 1 Kings 13.24 and 2 Kings 17.25,26).

David the future king of Israel, as a youth, told King Saul about an encounter he had with a lion: '*David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep his father's sheep, and when a lion...came and took a lamb out of the flock, I went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth; and when it arose against me, I caught it by its beard, and struck and killed it"*' [1 Samuel 17.34,35 NKJV].

David was relating this story to Saul to persuade the king to let him go into battle against Goliath, the Philistine giant. But we note here the sort of man David was; he was not boasting of, or relying on his own strength or prowess as a warrior: '*Moreover David said, "The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion .. he will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine"*' [1 Samuel 17.37 NKJV].

THE LION AS A SYMBOL

David's faith is seen later when he compares his enemies to the lions: '*O LORD my God, in you I put my trust; Save me from all those who persecute me; and deliver me. Lest they tear me like a lion, Rending me in pieces, while there is none to deliver*' [Psalm 7.1,2 NKJV]. It was this sort of faith that enabled another of God's servants to brave out a frightening ordeal with lions. The prophet Daniel, who was living in Babylon as a servant of the Persian king Darius, was thrown into a den of lions and survived a whole night

amongst these ferocious animals. Daniel too had no doubt who delivered him: “*My God sent his angel and shut the lion’s mouths, so that they have not hurt me*”...*So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no injury whatever was found on him, because he believed in his God*’ [Daniel 6.22,23 NKJV].



Human-headed winged lion from Nimrud in Assyria, 9th Century BC.

Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon has broken his bones’ [Jeremiah 50.17 NKJV].

THE LION OF JUDAH

We also find in God’s Word that the characteristics of the lion are used symbolically to describe Jesus himself and point to his future role on earth. In the first book of the Bible are recorded the blessings that Jacob gave to his sons. He said to Judah: ‘*Judah, you are he whom your brothers shall praise...Your father’s children shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion’s whelp; From the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion; and as a lion, who shall rouse him? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah...*’ [Genesis 49.8-10 NKJV]

These prophetic words show the purpose of God through the ‘lion-like’ tribe of Judah. The tribe of Judah became the royal line when David became king. The Sceptre will be passed on to Jesus Christ. ‘*He will be great.. and*

*the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David' [Luke 1.32 NKJV]. Jesus is described in the last book of the Bible as, 'the **Lion** of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David' [Revelation 5.5 NKJV].*

Jesus, '**the Lion of the tribe of Judah**' is coming back to this earth to take the throne of David and to rule over the restored kingdom of Israel in Jerusalem and from there his rulership will extend over the whole earth. The Bible teaches us that Jesus came the first time as '*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*' [John 1.29 NKJV]. However, in contrast, his second coming will be with lion-like characteristics, to break the nations in pieces and take vengeance on those who do not know God or obey the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (See Psalm 2 and 2 Thessalonians chapter 1)

Those who listen to the call of the gospel and obey its vital message, will have the opportunity to be with Jesus in his coming kingdom, to help him bring justice and peace to this troubled world. There are many prophetic word pictures which tell us about the great blessings of Christ's reign. Isaiah wrote concerning Judah's royal lion: '*The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding...with righteousness he shall judge the poor; and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his loins, and faithfulness the belt of his waist'* [Isaiah 11.2,4,5 NKJV].

The prophet also foretold the wonderful change that will come upon the natural world. '*The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb...the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; And the lion shall eat straw like the ox*' [Isaiah 11.6,7].

During this reign of the '**Lion of the Tribe of Judah**' the nations will be at peace. From him '*the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness*' [Isaiah 26.9 NKJV]. When the nations have learnt God's laws, the whole world will experience a time of peace and tranquillity. The Creation will be at rest, and the ferocity of evil men like that exhibited by the lion will be a thing of the past.

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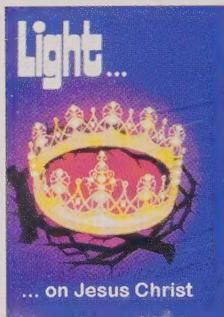
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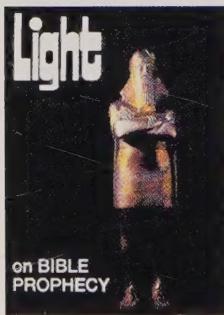
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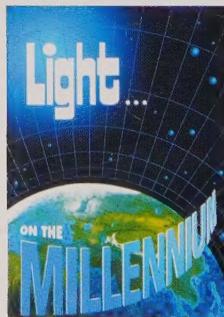
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